

China's Approach to Central Asia: The Shanghai Co-operation Organisation. Weiqing Song. Taylor & Francis. 2016. 182 pp. (ISBN-13: 9781138780781)

Some dramatic economic transformations and political intrusions affected China and Central Asia in the final decades of the twentieth century. Currently, the economic rise of China has attracted lots of attention and has been labeled a success story by the Western world. On the other hand, the five newly independent Central Asian countries are struggling to rebuild their economic base in an era of globalization. China and Central Asian countries have made some efforts to strengthen bilateral ties and improve cooperation on different fronts. After the transitional years of the 1990s, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) became an essential component of Eurasian politics to establish a new sort of cooperation between China and the former Soviet Central Asian countries. To this end, issues related to geopolitics, security, the economy and regional politics have been handled by the SCO member states.

The SCO is an intergovernmental organization founded on June 15, 2001, in Shanghai by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The primary goals of the SCO are strengthening confidence and good neighborly relations between the member countries. The ultimate goal is to make joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security, and stability in the region. Consequently, it would be fair to argue that the SCO has become an important part of China's regional strategy towards Central Asia. Moreover, the development of the SCO is of wider significance to global politics, security, and economics since the core member states form one-fifth of the earth's landmass with 30 million km², have one-fourth of the world's population and one-sixth of global GDP. Russia and China are two of the most prominent states in the international system as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

This book by Weiqing Song delves into China's foreign policy orientation towards Central Asia via the SCO. It reviews the power and interests of the SCO member states and their influence on the formation and evolution of the organization, concentrating on China's leading role in this process, and covering a range of issues related to the SCO's organizational development.

In the introductory chapter, the author highlights several primary objectives of the book such as the identification of China's strategic rationale towards Central Asia, the trajectory of the evolution of the SCO and the description of the institutionalization process of the SCO. Moreover, the book provides the reader with a detailed and well-rounded analysis from a Chinese perspective regarding not only the interactions taking place between China and other SCO member states but also the relations between the SCO and some non-member countries.

The first part of the book introduces the reader to the broad context of China's strategic interests and motivations regarding Central Asia within the SCO framework (Chapter 1). After establishing a framework for empirically analyzing the SCO process, the author provides the fundamental interests, motivations and power statuses of the SCO members (Chapter 2).

The second part of the book attempts to scrutinize the internal and external dimensions of the SCO, centering on the organization's regional institutionalization process (Chapter 3) and the interactions between the SCO and its member states and other actors (Chapter 4). These other participants include observer states – Afghanistan, India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan – and great powers with significant stakes and leverage in the region – the United States, Japan, Turkey, and EU countries. The author also elucidates the various roles played by international organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) vis-à-vis the SCO.

Part three of the book provides detailed information on the SCO's substantive cooperation in three major areas: political and security spheres (Chapter 5), economic and functional areas (Chapter 6), and cultural and educational matters (Chapter 7). By focusing on those different aspects/cases, the author illuminates the usefulness of the SCO framework for Chinese foreign policy in Eurasia.

There is no doubt that recognition of the importance of the region has culminated in the recent Chinese initiative of "One Belt, One Road," which highlights Central Asia as the essential link in China's planned New Silk Road strategy. It seems that by highlighting the strategic importance of China's involvement in Central Asia, Weiqing Song is prescribing a new strategy and foreign policy orientation for the Chinese government.

The book is a great addition to the fast growing field of Silk Road studies, and it provides insights into how Chinese strategic thinking interacts with the goals and actions of other countries in the SCO, and by doing so, it deepens the reader's understanding of China's foreign policy perceptions and priorities. The book has immense value for China studies, and it will benefit academics and researchers as well as policy makers and students focusing on Eurasian geopolitics.

Cagri Erdem
Keimyung University, Korea